2014



How Does Learning Happen?

Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years



A resource about learning through relationships for those who work with young children and their families

Ontario

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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *Cadre stratégique de l'Ontario sur la petite enfance.*

This publication is also available on the Ministry of Education's website, at www.ontario.ca/edu.

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How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years is the product of hundreds of conversations.

The Ministry of Education would like to sincerely thank the many voices that have contributed to this document. Your experience, knowledge, wisdom, and passion have informed our collective thinking to shape this transformational document.

Over the past two years, we have engaged with various partners, system leaders, experts, professionals, and practitioners from all segments of the early years sector. Through individual dialogue, local focus groups, and various provincial forums, there were many rich discussions and there will be many more to come.

We look forward to continuing our conversations across the province as we explore together how learning happens.





A Vision for Ontario's Early Years

Children's early experiences last a lifetime.

During our first years of life, the brain develops at an astounding rate. Scientists now know this process is not just genetic but is dramatically influenced by our early experiences with people and our surroundings.[1]

While a child's principal sources for supportive relationships and learning experiences are at home, many Ontario children also attend child care and child and family programs. Early years programs play an important role in supporting children's learning, development, health, and well-being. Evidence from diverse fields of study tells us that children grow in programs where adults are caring and responsive. Children succeed in programs that focus on active learning through exploration, play, and inquiry. Children thrive in programs where they and their families are valued as active participants and contributors.

In January 2013, the Ontario government released the *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework*, which articulates the following vision for early years programs:

> *"Ontario's children and families are well supported by a system of responsive, high-quality, accessible, and increasingly integrated early years programs and services that contribute to healthy child development today and a stronger future tomorrow."*[2]

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years, 2014 builds on this policy framework and is a key component of Ontario's vision for the early years. It demonstrates our commitment to strengthening the quality of early years programs by ensuring these programs are centred on the child and the family.

There is perhaps no relationship that holds greater responsibility or reward than the relationships we develop with children. As educators, as family members, as policy makers, or as administrators, we all know that the stronger our partnerships and the deeper and more valuable our connections, the greater the benefit. It's an investment that allows us all to grow.

1. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, n.d.

2. Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2013, p. 2.

Introduction



How does learning happen?

> What relationships and environments support it? What actions support children's learning? What does theory and research tell us? These are questions with constantly evolving and shifting answers. While there are general principles and knowledge we can refer to, we must always think, feel, and act in ways that reflect the environment, the circumstances, and most importantly the children, families, and colleagues we have before us in every unique situation. As we question, research, reflect, respond, and co-construct our understanding of the world around us with children and families, we gain new perspectives and new and more complex questions arise. This document is not so much about providing all the answers, but rather is intended to provoke questions – for it is in exploring our questions that learning happens.

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years is a professional learning resource guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families. It is intended to support pedagogy and curriculum/program development in early years programs.

Pedagogy is "the understanding of how learning takes place and the philosophy and practice that support that understanding of learning".[3] Curriculum (the content of learning) and pedagogy (how learning happens) in early years settings are shaped by views about children, the role of educators and families, and relationships among them. This pedagogical document, *How Does Learning Happen?*, helps educators focus on these interrelationships in the context of early years environments.

> We have used the term "educator" throughout this document to refer to all who work with children and families in early years programs (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, child and family programs, before and after school programs).

3. *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2007), p. 90; hereafter cited as ELECT.

How Does Learning Happen? sets out a shared understanding of children, families, and educators.

Reflecting on these views about children, families, and educators in the context of the early years environment is a starting point for developing programs and practices to support learning.

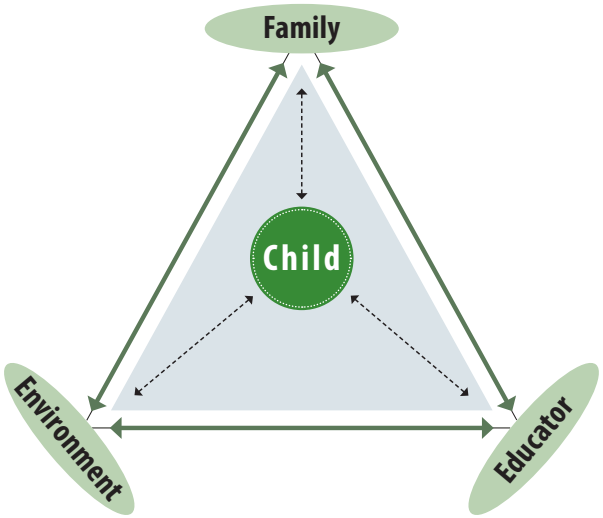


Figure 1. Learning and development happens within the context of relationships among children, families, educators, and their environments.

An Understanding of Children, Families, and Educators

Setting out and acting on a strong image of children, families, and educators has a profound impact on what happens in early years settings.[4] Reflecting on a shared understanding and working towards greater consistency between what we say and what we do provides a means to strengthen and transform early years programs across the province.

Children are competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential. They grow up in families with diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Every child should feel that he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor to his or her surroundings, and deserves the opportunity to succeed. When we recognize children as capable and curious, we are more likely to deliver programs and services that value and build on their strengths and abilities.



4. Moss, 2010.

Families are composed of individuals who are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience. Families love their children and want the best for them. Families are experts on their children. They are the first and most powerful influence on children's learning, development, health, and well-being. Families bring diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Families should feel that they belong, are valuable contributors to their children's learning, and deserve to be engaged in a meaningful way.

Educators are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience. They are knowledgeable, caring, reflective, and resourceful professionals. They bring diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. They collaborate with others to create engaging environments and experiences to foster children's learning and development. Educators are lifelong learners. They take responsibility for their own learning and make decisions about ways to integrate knowledge from theory, research, their own experience, and their understanding of the individual children and families they work with. Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work.

The Four Foundations of *How Does Learning Happen?*

How Does Learning Happen? is organized around four foundational conditions that are important for children to grow and flourish: **Belonging**, **Well-Being**, **Engagement**, and **Expression**. These foundations, or *ways of being*, are a vision for all children's future potential and a view of what they should experience each and every day. These four foundations apply regardless of age, ability, culture, language, geography, or setting. They are aligned with the Kindergarten program. They are conditions that children naturally seek for themselves.

- **Belonging** refers to a sense of connectedness to others, an individual's experiences of being valued, of forming relationships with others and making contributions as part of a group, a community, the natural world.
- **Well-being** addresses the importance of physical and mental health and wellness. It incorporates capacities such as self-care, sense of self, and self-regulation skills.
- **Engagement** suggests a state of being involved and focused. When children are able to explore the world around them with their natural curiosity and exuberance, they are fully engaged. Through this type of play and inquiry, they develop skills such as problem solving, creative thinking, and innovating, which are essential for learning and success in school and beyond.

- **Expression** or communication (to be heard, as well as to listen) may take many different forms. Through their bodies, words, and use of materials, children develop capacities for increasingly complex communication. Opportunities to explore materials support creativity, problem solving, and mathematical behaviours. Language-rich environments support growing communication skills, which are foundational for literacy.

A focus on these foundations throughout all aspects of early years programs ensures optimal learning and healthy development.

While this pedagogical document is built on the above foundations, the groundwork for *How Does Learning Happen?* is the 2007 publication *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings*, commonly referred to as ELECT or the Early Learning Framework.





Figure 2. The four foundations ensure optimal learning and development. These foundations inform the goals for children and expectations for programs.

ELECT and a Brief History of Early Learning in Ontario



All educators who deliver high-quality early years programs know that you are never done.

The Ontario government launched Best Start in 2005 along with the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning. The panel's mandate was to create an early learning framework that would help to improve quality and consistency in early childhood settings across Ontario.

In January 2007, the government published *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings*. This early learning framework, referred to as ELECT throughout this document, sets out six principles to guide practice in early years settings. It also provides a continuum of development for children from birth to age eight.

ELECT is recognized as a foundational document in the early years sector. It provides a shared language and common understanding of children's learning and development for early years professionals as they work together in various early childhood settings. The principles of ELECT have informed provincial child care policy, such as the *Ontario Early Years Policy Framework*, as well as pan-Canadian early learning initiatives such as the *Statement on Play* of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. ELECT principles are also embedded in the program document used in Ontario's innovative Kindergarten program.

The Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning based the principles in ELECT on their professional expertise, as well as an extensive review of Canadian and international research about early childhood development and learning. These principles have provided a starting point for reflection and deeper investigation.

Over the past several years, ELECT has had a significant impact. Many child care operators, child and family programs, municipalities, postsecondary institutions, and other organizations have integrated elements of ELECT into their programs, training, and quality improvement strategies.

ELECT Principles[5]

Principle 1: Positive experiences in early childhood set the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, health, and well-being.

Principle 2: Partnerships with families and communities are essential.

Principle 3: Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion is vital.

Principle 4: An intentional, planned program supports learning.

Principle 5: Play and inquiry are learning approaches that capitalize on children's natural curiosity and exuberance.

Principle 6: Knowledgeable, responsive, and reflective educators are essential.

Building from ELECT to *How Does Learning Happen?*

Now, seven years after the publication of ELECT, this pedagogical document, *How Does Learning Happen?*, has been created to help educators build on their foundational knowledge of the early years. This resource guide represents our evolving understanding of children, pedagogy (how learning happens), and the role of educators in supporting learning in the early years. It is grounded in new research and leading-edge practice from around the world. It incorporates what we have learned from ELECT and how it has been applied in programs and practice across the province. Rather than considering the principles of ELECT as separate elements, *How Does Learning Happen?* helps us think about how the principles work together.

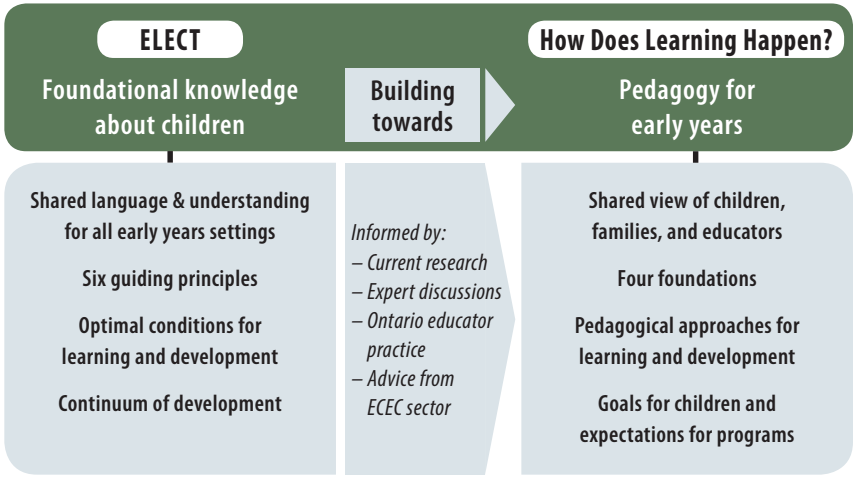


Figure 3. Building from a foundational knowledge about children and moving towards new understandings about pedagogy are supported by an ongoing practice of critical reflection and learning.

5. ELECT, pp. 7–20.

Research, Theory, and Practice

Different schools of thought – from Dewey to Vygotsky, Mustard to Malaguzzi[6] – have shaped educators' approaches and understanding of children, families, and early learning and development.

Neuroscience, developmental and social psychology, economics, medical research, and education and early childhood theory and studies have all added to our knowledge of the early years. Over the past decade research across these disciplines gives us a dramatic and consistent story. *High-quality early childhood settings are associated with immediate and long-term positive outcomes for children*. Studies show that children who attend high-quality early childhood programs where they experience warm, supportive relationships are happier, less anxious, and more motivated to learn than children who do not.[7]



6. References and additional resources are available on the Ministry of Education website, at www.ontario.ca/edu.
7. Shanker, 2013.

What's Most Important?

Recurring themes from research, theory, and practice suggest that high-quality early childhood programs:

- establish positive, responsive relationships with children and their families;
- value children as individuals and as active and competent contributors with their own interests and points of view;
- recognize the connection between emotional well-being and social and cognitive development and the importance of focusing on these areas holistically;
- provide environments and experiences for children to explore ideas, investigate their theories, and interact with others in play;
- engage with families and support each child within the context of his or her family, recognizing that family and child well-being are inextricably linked;
- provide ongoing opportunities for educators to engage in critical reflection and discussion with others about pedagogy and practice to support continuous professional learning and growth.

How to Use This Resource Guide



How Does Learning Happen? is for those who work with and care for young children (from birth to 8 years of age) in child care and child and family programs. It may also serve as a useful resource for those working with children in other contexts. This resource guide is intended to inspire educators and administrators in early years settings and to ignite critical reflection and discussion. Incorporating a shared understanding of the roles of the educator, child, and family, it provides **goals for children** and **expectations for programs** in a chart format. The examples are by no means exhaustive but rather are intended as a starting point for thinking about the types of environments, experiences, and interactions that support each goal and program expectation. This pedagogical document also includes **questions for reflection** – a section that challenges educators and administrators to discuss and reflect on their taken-for-granted beliefs and practices and to take on the role of researchers, applying new ideas from theory and research to their existing knowledge.

Goals for Children

Goals for children's learning, development, health, and well-being are integral to all aspects of early years programs, from policies and procedures to environments, experiences, and interactions. Grounded in a view of the child as competent and capable and organized around the foundations of **belonging**, **well-being**, **engagement**, and **expression**, the goals will help educators and administrators remain focused on children first and foremost throughout all elements of the program. The goals are *not* intended to be used as a checklist of tasks to be completed or benchmarks to be achieved. They are intended to be used by educators in planning and creating environments, experiences, and contexts for children's learning and development across all domains. They are also intended to guide the process of observing, documenting, studying, and discussing children's experiences with families.

- Every child has a sense of **belonging** when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world.
- Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and **well-being**.
- Every child is an active and **engaged** learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses.
- Every child is a capable communicator who **expresses** himself or herself in many ways.

Expectations for Programs

The expectations for programs align with the goals for children. They provide concrete ideas about how educators, administrators, families, and communities can work together towards the goals for children's learning, development, health, and well-being. They are not an exhaustive list but are meant to provide a starting point for educators as they work towards the goals for children. The expectations for programs:

- provide pedagogical direction and examples educators can refer to as they think about and plan how to act on the goals for children;
- help educators become researchers and co-learners with children, parents, caregivers, and colleagues – learning about children, with children, and from children;
- help educators focus on building and maintaining relationships and supporting connections among themselves, children, families, and the early years environment.

The expectations for programs provide pedagogical direction for educators as they:

- cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections to create a sense of **belonging** among and between children, adults, and the world around them;
- nurture children's **healthy development** and support their growing sense of self;
- provide environments and experiences to **engage** children in active, creative, and meaningful exploration, play, and inquiry;
- foster communication and **expression** in all forms.

Questions for Reflection

The questions support critical reflection and provide a means for discussing, interpreting, investigating, and acting on the goals for children. Thoughtful questioning and challenging of the status quo on an ongoing basis can help transform programs and bring out the best in children, families, and educators. There are many ways to engage in critical reflection, for example:

- Administrators, boards, parents, and educators may focus on several of the questions for discussion as they consider the policies and procedures of their program.
- Educator teams may choose a particular question to investigate over a period of time (and also include families in their inquiry).
- A group of educators from several programs may study their practice and share their experiences in relation to one of the goals for children.
- Individuals may incorporate various questions into personal daily reflections at the beginning and end of each day.

These questions are a starting point. Educators and administrators are encouraged to consider additional questions that emerge from the goals and expectations during daily practice.

"By involving ourselves in a constant inquiry into what we believe … we will be on a journey of getting to be better and better as teachers all the time."[8]

8. Callaghan, 2011, Early Learning Framework website, *Principle 6: What the experts say.*



Supporting a Continuum of Learning

Pedagogical approaches and practices that work for young children are similar to strategies that work for learners of all ages, from infancy to adulthood. A common view of children as competent and capable, a shared understanding of the foundations for learning and development, and coherence across pedagogical approaches lead to more seamless programs for children, families, and all learners along a continuum of learning and development. This vision is illustrated below.

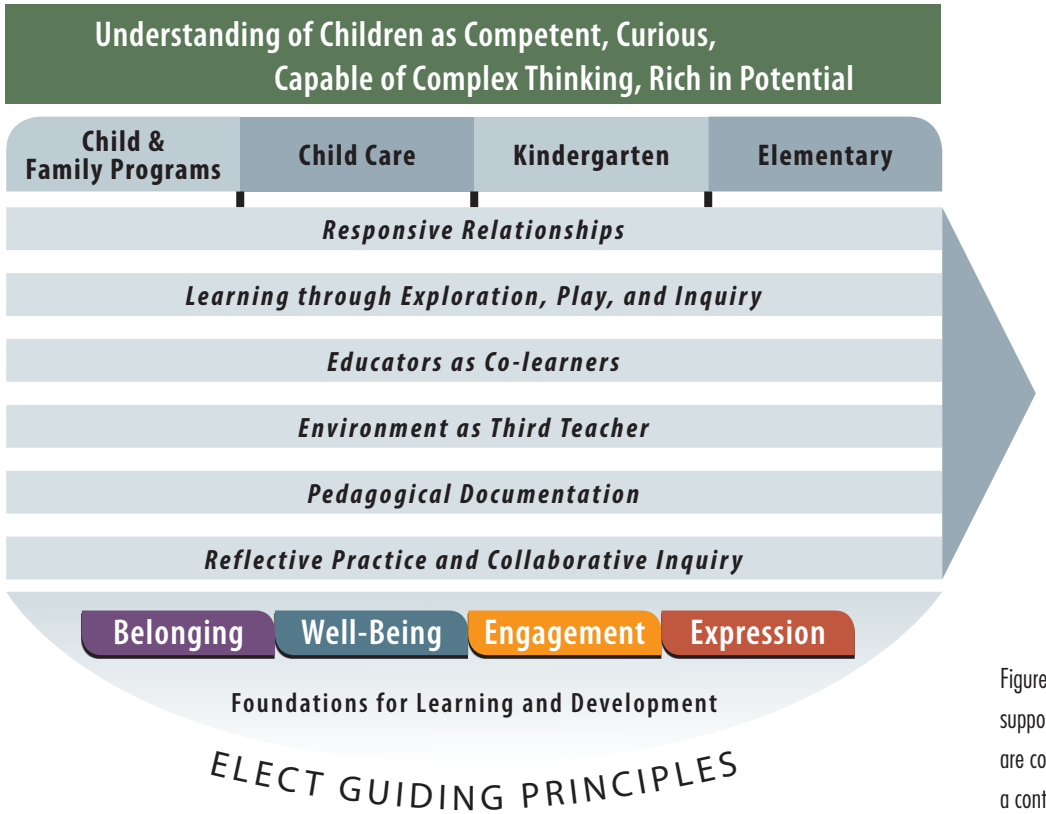


Figure 4. Pedagogical approaches to support the key foundations for learning are common across settings and ages for a continuum of learning.

Early Years Curriculum

Early years curriculum frameworks have become a priority in nearly all developed countries. A common framework has many benefits and contributes to higher quality early years experiences and outcomes. According to the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, a curriculum framework:

- establishes a common understanding of good practice across different settings;
- provides pedagogical direction for educators;
- informs and includes families in what and how their children are learning and developing;
- supports increased continuity for children as they transition across settings.[9]

Curriculum in early years settings is very different from that used in formal school contexts. As defined in ELECT, early years curriculum is the sum total of experiences, activities, and events that occur within an inclusive environment designed to foster children's well-being, learning, and development and ensure meaningful participation for every child. It begins with an informed understanding of what children are capable of learning and how they learn effectively; it sets out goals for children's learning and development, health, and well-being; and it provides direction for educators.[10] This is the basis of training in the early childhood education field.[11] It is an expectation for all registered early childhood educators in Ontario.[12]

The focus is *not* on teaching a body of knowledge or a predetermined set of topics. Nor is it centred on children's achievement of a specific skill set. In the early years, programs are most effective when the content of learning is focused on supporting the development of strategies, dispositions, and skills for lifelong learning through play and inquiry.

Through play and inquiry, young children practise ways of learning and interacting with the world around them that they will apply throughout their lives. Problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration, creativity and imagination, initiative and citizenship are all capacities vital for success throughout school and beyond.[13]

How Does Learning Happen? asks educators to be attuned to what children know, what they wonder about, and their working theories about the world around them. Educators engage with, observe, and listen to children. They discuss with other educators, as well as with children and families and caregivers, the possibilities for children's further exploration in increasingly complex ways. All are co-learners, constructing knowledge together.

9. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012.
10. ELECT, p. 66.
11. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Ontario, December 2012, p. 8; College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011, p. 19.
12. College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011.
13. Fullan, 2013.

> "In taking a negotiated learning approach, teachers move beyond simply providing children with experiences. They probe further, either by asking questions, or by engaging in discussion to discover why children are deeply absorbed in exploring a material, or they try to figure out what children are thinking as they touch, taste, examine, and explore [the world around them]."[14]

Early Years Pedagogy

Pedagogy is defined as the understanding of how learning happens and the philosophy and practice that support that understanding of learning.[15]

The term "pedagogy" may be unfamiliar to some in early years settings. Thinking about pedagogy provides a new way for educators to consider their work. It helps educators to:

- look more carefully at *what* they do each and every day;
- think about the *why* of their practice;
- understand more deeply *how* their actions have an impact on children and their families.

Pedagogical approaches that nurture learning and development in the early years include:

- establishing positive, responsive adult-child relationships;
- providing inclusive learning environments and experiences that encourage exploration, play, and inquiry;
- engaging as co-learners with children, families/caregivers, and others;
- planning and creating environments as a "third teacher";
- using pedagogical documentation as a means to value, discuss, and make learning visible;
- participating in ongoing reflective practice and collaborative inquiry with others.[16]

These same approaches that are effective for children are also key elements of learning and engagement for families and those who work with children; what is good pedagogy for children is also good pedagogy for adults.



14. Fraser, 2012, p. 184.
15. ELECT, p. 90.
16. References and additional resources on pedagogical approaches are available on the Ministry of Education website, at www.ontario.ca/edu.

The Child

Understanding Child Development

A solid understanding of child development is essential for educators to apply the pedagogical approaches that are outlined in this document. Child development provides a body of knowledge that can help us to recognize and articulate children's observed behaviours and discuss their emerging skills with families and others.

When educators have an understanding of child development – of what has come before and what may come next – they are able to provide experiences that challenge children to stretch just beyond what they know and can do. As L.S. Vygotsky suggests, "good learning" happens through interactions where the adult can challenge children and provoke learning at a level that is slightly in advance of the child's current capacities.[17] Knowing what to expect in typically developing children can also help educators to recognize when a child is experiencing challenges or when his or her needs are not being met.

ELECT provides a resource, the **continuum of development**, that educators can use to understand the sequences of development. It is not a lock-step, universal pattern that should be achieved according to a specific timetable, nor is it intended to be used as an assessment tool or checklist of tasks to be completed.[18]

17. Vygotsky, 1978.
18. ELECT, p. 22.

While child development is often categorized into separate domains, it is important to keep in mind that all aspects of human development are interconnected. ELECT says, "separating out the development of emotional maturity from social competence or language abilities is an artificial categorization of what is an integrated process".[19] Research tells us that high-quality programs are those that integrate all areas of development in a holistic manner, with no greater emphasis on one area over another.[20]

Understanding Children from Different Perspectives

While it is important to pay attention to children's development across the "traditional" domains (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development), this does not provide the whole picture. Other areas such as the creative, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of experience must also be considered.

How Does Learning Happen? further expands on what we know about child development and invites educators to consider a more complex view of children and the contexts in which they learn and make sense of the world around them. This thinking may require, for some, a shift in mindsets and habits. It may prompt a rethinking of theories and practices – a change in what we pay attention to; in the conversations that we have with children, families, and colleagues; and in how we plan and prepare.

Children are influenced by multiple factors such as the family, social and cultural contexts in which they live and play, their own

19. ELECT, p. 21.
20. OECD, 2013.

unique perspectives, and their life experiences. Educators can know more about the complexity of each child and can deepen children's learning and experiences when they look at and listen to children from multiple perspectives, asking, for example:

- What are the unique strengths and needs, approaches, attitudes, and dispositions of each child?
- How do a child's relationships, families, home environments, and the cultural context in which the child lives influence his or her development and learning?
- What motivates a child's actions; what is meaningful to him or her; what brings a child joy?
- What can be done to extend and deepen children's learning?
- What do I know about each child's unique spirit and character?

These same questions can be applied to families.

The Family

Gaining knowledge about children from multiple perspectives helps educators ensure that programs also value the unique and diverse characteristics of the children's families and the communities in which they live. It's not a "one-size-fits-all" approach. In particular, programs should be reflective of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families they serve, including those from First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and francophone communities. "The web of family and community is the child's anchor for early development."[21]

21. ELECT, p. 9.

A shared view of families as competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience informs our relationships with families and has a significant impact on children. The principles of ELECT, as well as findings from recent research, highlight the importance of strong, respectful, and reciprocal relationships with families. Creating an environment that welcomes families into the space, inviting their perspectives and providing opportunities for families to participate in meaningful ways (that they are most comfortable with) on an ongoing basis, supports their sense of belonging.[22] Some questions educators can reflect on to ensure that families are valued, for example, include:

- What are the unique characteristics and strengths of each family in our program?
- How can we weave these into different areas of the program?
- What can we do to strengthen "cultural competence" within our program?
- How can we help families to experience a sense of belonging in our program?
- How can we engage with families as co-learners about and with their children?

When we recognize and build on the strengths of families and the love they have for their children, everyone benefits.



22. FRP Canada, 2011.

The Community

Early years settings can play a key role in promoting the visibility, inclusion, and active participation of young children in society.[23] Opportunities to engage with people, places, and the natural world in the local environment help children, families, educators, and communities build connections, learn and discover, and make contributions to the world around them. It fosters a sense of belonging to the local community, the natural environment, and the larger universe of living things. As well, communities benefit from the rich experiences they have in learning about, with, and from children.

"Programs are most effective if the primary focus stays on supporting the child within his or her family and community. Child, family and community well-being must be equally valued, since they are inextricably linked."[24] Educators can reflect on ways to build connections with the local environment by asking, for example:

- What opportunities are available in our community to build connections?
- How can we facilitate stronger relationships within our local community?
- What contributions can we make in caring for the natural environment around us?

23. Dahlberg et al., 2007.
24. FRP Canada, 2011, p. 15.

The Educator

The role of the educator is multidimensional. The best educators, first and foremost, use a warm, responsive, and inclusive approach, building positive relationships with children, families, colleagues, and communities. Educators participate as co-learners with families and children – learning with children, about children, and from children. Knowledgeable educators get involved in play with children to support development, challenge thinking, and extend learning. They engage in reciprocal relationships with families and caregivers, learning about, with, and from them. Educators share their professional knowledge and experience and also seek out the knowledge and perspectives of families. The value of early years educators cannot be overstated.

Educators are reflective practitioners who learn about children using various strategies. They listen, observe, document, and discuss with others, families in particular, to understand children as unique individuals. They observe and listen to learn how children make meaning through their experiences in the world around them. Educators consider their own practices and approaches and the impacts they have on children, families, and others.

Educators use this knowledge, gained through observing and discussing with others, and their professional judgement to create contexts to support children's learning, development, health, and well-being.

Critical Reflection

A process of critical reflection, learning, and growth is the basis of high-quality programs that continuously improve and create contexts that are meaningful for the children and families/caregivers they serve. Children learn through questioning and testing theories in their play. In the same way, we encourage educators to be researchers, to try new ideas and test theories. When educators engage in continuous learning and questioning, exploring new ideas and adjusting practices, they achieve the best outcomes for children, families, and themselves.[25]

Through critical reflection, educators test long-standing views and taken-for-granted practices and consider new approaches and ways of thinking about their work. As described by John Dewey, learning happens through "reflective action (action given careful consideration and justification) as opposed to routine action (action driven by habit and routine)".[26] *How Does Learning Happen?* supports educators in thinking, feeling, acting on their ideas and questions, and learning *about* and *with* children and families every day.

Collaborative Inquiry

When educators engage with others in critical reflection as a means to question theory and practice, discuss ideas, test theories, and share learning, they are engaging in collaborative inquiry.

"In practice, inquiry engages teachers as learners in critical and creative thinking. It honours openness and flexibility. Through collaborative dialogue, teachers seek emergent possibilities – new questions and solutions."[27] Collaborative inquiry can be carried out within individual programs, in community networks, or as action research projects. When educators engage in critical reflection together, they discover multiple perspectives and deeper understandings.

The Environment

The environment is the context in which learning takes place. The environment was described by Loris Malaguzzi as "the third teacher" and is valued for its power to organize, promote relationships, and educate. It mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of those who use the space.[28] As suggested by Karyn Callaghan, "the environment *is* a teacher".[29] From the aesthetics of the space, to the type of furnishings and materials available, to the organization of time, the environment communicates a powerful message and contributes to shaping the actions that can be taken within it.

Children thrive in indoor and outdoor spaces that invite them to investigate, imagine, think, create, solve problems, and make meaning from their experiences – especially when the spaces contain interesting and complex open-ended materials that children can use in many ways. In addition, when the schedule allows for long periods of uninterrupted play, with

25. MacNaughton, 2003; Paige-Smith & Craft, 2011; Raban et al., 2007.
26. Dewey, 1933, pp. 4–7.
27. Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2010, p. 2.
28. Malaguzzi, 1993.
29. Callaghan, 2013, p. 11.

few transitions, children are calmer and more engaged. When the environment supports children's growing autonomy and independence, challenging behaviours are reduced and educators can focus more fully on observing, interacting, and extending children's learning and development in meaningful ways.[30]

All of these benefits occur especially within children's connections to and interactions with the natural world. Opportunities to experience nature enhance children's sense of wonder and joy in the world around them, whether programs are located in large urban centres with small patches of green space, gardens, and trees or in vast fields and forests. A growing body of research suggests that connecting to the natural world contributes to children's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being.[31] Providing daily opportunities to explore, care for, and interact with the natural world helps to strengthen these connections.



30. Shanker, 2013; Wien, 2004.
31. Louv, 2008.

Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation is about more than recording events – it is a means to learning about how children think and learn. It offers a process to explore all of our questions about children. As suggested by Carlina Rinaldi, it is a way of listening to children, helping us to learn about children during the course of their experiences and to make this learning visible to others for interpretation.[32] And, it encourages educators to be co-learners alongside both children and their families.

> "Pedagogical documentation supports educators in both including child development in their view, but also looking beyond development to capture broader aspects of experience for reflection."[33]

Moving beyond simply an objective reporting of children's behaviour, pedagogical documentation helps to find meaning in what children do and what they experience.[34] It is:

- a way to value children's experiences and include their perspectives;
- a way to make children's learning and understanding of the world around them visible to the children themselves;
- a process for educators to co-plan with children and with families;

32. Rinaldi, 2004.
33. Wien, 2013, p. 28.
34. Gandini & Kaminsky, n.d.

- a means of sharing perspectives with parents and colleagues. When families and others are invited to contribute to the documentation and share their own interpretations, it can provide even more insights that children, educators, and families can return to, reflect on, and remember in order to extend learning.

Using questions can help to frame documentation, support planning that reflects the complexity of children's lived experiences, and provide a deeper understanding of why these experiences are important for children. For example:

- Asking "How do children demonstrate they are competent and capable of complex thinking?" helps educators build on what children already know and can do. It helps to ensure the environments and experiences created for children are engaging and stimulating rather than limiting children's potential.
- Asking "How is a child's current approach to a problem different from an earlier response?" helps educators to identify the progression of learning and the increasing complexity of approaches. This can be shared with parents and with children themselves.
- Asking "What questions and theories do children have about the world around them? How are they going about finding answers to their questions or testing their theories?" helps educators to be co-learners with children. This can help educators to make sure the materials and experiences available to children support this deeper investigation.
- Asking "How do children form relationships with one another?" helps educators understand where children might need assistance in engaging in positive interactions, recognize and foster developing social skills, and support children's sense of belonging.



Foundations for Learning



How Does Learning Happen? includes goals for children and expectations for programs. Organized around the foundations of belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression, the goals and expectations integrate the six guiding principles of ELECT. Rather than considering the principles as separate elements in high-quality programs, this pedagogical document helps us to think about how the principles and the goals and expectations work together.

The goals and expectations help educators to strive to provide the best experiences and outcomes for children and families and for educators. These components are outlined in the chart below.

FOUNDATIONS	GOALS FOR CHILDREN	EXPECTATIONS FOR PROGRAMS
Belonging	Every child has a sense of belonging when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world.	Early childhood programs cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections to create a sense of belonging among and between children, adults, and the world around them.
Well-Being	Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and well-being.	Early childhood programs nurture children's healthy development and support their growing sense of self.
Engagement	Every child is an active and engaged learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses.	Early childhood programs provide environments and experiences to engage children in active, creative, and meaningful exploration, play, and inquiry.
Expression	Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways.	Early childhood programs foster communication and expression in all forms.

Belonging: Cultivating Authentic Relationships and Connections

Goal for children: Every child has a sense of belonging when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world.

Program expectation: Early childhood programs cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections to create a sense of belonging among and between children, adults, and the world around them.

Overview

> "*Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, which affect virtually all aspects of their development.*"[35]

Fostering good relationships with children and their families is the single most important priority for educators in early years programs. The ability to establish constructive relationships with children and families is a requirement for Registered Early Childhood Educators in Ontario, as set out in the College of Early Childhood Educators *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*.[36]

A significant body of research indicates that positive, caring, and respectful relationships are the foundation for optimal learning, development, health, and well-being. By responding positively to children's cues and engaging in reciprocal interactions with them, educators support the development of secure relationships.[37] Secure relationships contribute to children's emotional well-being and provide them with a safe environment in which to learn. Positive interactions support the development of social and cognitive competence and communication skills,[38] which in turn strengthen children's capacity to learn in the short and long term. When children are strongly connected to their caregivers, they feel safe and have the confidence to play, explore, and learn about the world around them.

Enabling children to develop a sense of belonging as part of a group is also a key contributor to their lifelong well-being. A sense of belonging is supported when each child's unique spirit, individuality, and presence are valued.

> "*Every child deserves to have someone's eyes light up when they enter the room.*"[39]

As children engage in various forms of social play and are supported to recognize the varied capabilities and characteristics of other children, they learn to get along with others; to negotiate, collaborate, and communicate; and to care for others. Studies show that when educators modelled and helped children

35. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 1.
36. College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011.
37. Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965; Bowlby, 1988; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012.
38. Burchinal et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2011; Wylie et al., 2009.
39. Clinton, 2012.

express feelings, recognize others' feelings, and help others, children developed positive social skills such as perspective-taking, empathy,[40] and emotion regulation[41] and were less likely to engage in problematic behaviours.[42]

Relationships matter for families too. Families develop trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging in programs that value the centrality of the family to the health and well-being of children. In high-quality programs, the aim is to strive to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships among educators and families, and to view families as important contributors with unique knowledge, experiences, and strengths.[43] Children's sense of belonging and feelings of security are also strengthened when they have opportunities to make and explore connections between home and the early childhood program. Inviting families to participate (at their comfort level) in their children's experiences in early years programs ignites children's interest in learning.[44] When educators build relationships and work in partnership with families, understand the family's perception of their child, and help families know their child from the educator's point of view, everyone gains a deeper understanding.

Early years settings can play a key role in promoting the visibility, inclusion, and active participation of young children in society.[45] All children benefit from being in inclusive environments where they are able to participate and collaborate in meaningful ways and form authentic, caring relationships. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) highlight how all children, including those with special needs, are entitled to the same opportunities – for example to health care, nutrition, education, social inclusion, and protection. When children with special needs have access to appropriate support from early years programs it can help them to have rich and fulfilling childhoods and prepare them for meaningful participation in society.[46]

Through opportunities to engage with and make contributions to the world around them, children develop a sense of belonging and connectedness to their local community, the natural environment, and the larger universe of living things. Supporting children's connections to the natural world is an important area of focus. Opportunities to experience nature every day and to care for and interact with the natural world enhance children's connections to the world around them. A growing body of research suggests that connecting to the natural world contributes to children's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being.[47]



40. Gordon, 2005; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Odom, 2002.
41. Shanker, 2013.
42. Pickens, 2009; Schultz et al., 2011.
43. FRP Canada, 2011.
44. Gordon, 2005.
45. Dahlberg et al., 2007.
46. World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2012, p.5.
47. Louv, 2008.

Goals and Expectations

Belonging: Cultivating Authentic Relationships and Connections

Ways in which children might demonstrate a sense of belonging	Ways in which programs can help create a sense of belonging	Additional considerations for educators
Goal for children: *Every child has a sense of belonging when he or she is connected to others and contributes to their world.* Children demonstrate a sense of belonging when they: • feel included and safe in relationships with adults and other children in the early years setting; • participate fully in ways that are most comfortable to them; • participate in social interactions, shared exploration, play, and learning with adults and children; • make smooth transitions between home and early years settings; • begin to show concern and empathy and take action to assist others; • notice similarities and differences between self and others and respond positively to the uniqueness, differing capabilities, and perspectives of others;	***Program expectation:*** *Early childhood programs cultivate authentic, caring relationships and connections to create a sense of belonging among and between children, adults, and the world around them.* Educators can create contexts in which all children can develop a sense of belonging by: • being attuned to the physical and emotional states of each child and responding in a warm and sensitive manner; • connecting with each child and recognizing and valuing his or her unique spirit, individuality, and presence; • planning for ways to support smooth transitions: – between the home and the early years setting, – in daily routines, – across early years settings; • supporting relationships between children as they initiate, respond, collaborate, celebrate, and demonstrate care for others;	A warm and caring manner is conveyed through body language as well as words – how we touch, carry, and move children through daily routines sends a strong message. Capitalize on opportunities for one-to-one interactions during daily routines (e.g., *for infants and toddlers*: diaper changing, dressing to go outdoors, and feeding/meal times are ideal opportunities for making connections and building relationships). Discover the unique characteristics and gifts of each child by talking with his or her family, observing, and documenting (e.g., in addition to what the children are interested in, notice what brings them joy and how they relate to others and to the environment around them; to support inclusion, consider each child's capabilities rather than focusing solely on his or her needs and deficiencies). *(continued)*

Belonging: Cultivating Authentic Relationships and Connections *(continued)*

Ways in which children might demonstrate a sense of belonging	Ways in which programs can help create a sense of belonging	Additional considerations for educators
• recognize, explore, and make connections: – between home and the early childhood setting, – with their community, – with the natural environment; • express a sense of purpose as they participate and make contributions to the program and community.	• developing policies, practices, and environments that respect and support inclusion, meaningful participation, and a sense of belonging for all children; • finding ways to intentionally integrate the unique perspectives and gifts of parents, caregivers, and extended family throughout all elements of the program in a meaningful and authentic way; • establishing and maintaining positive reciprocal relationships with community partners to support meaningful participation; • creating opportunities throughout daily experiences that enable children to explore, wonder about, care for, and make connections to the natural environment; • giving visibility to the many relationships that children form with adults, other children, the community, and the natural world through various forms of documentation; • inviting community members to contribute to and participate in the program and providing opportunities for children to participate and make meaningful contributions to the community on an ongoing basis.	Rather than reprimanding children for undesirable behaviours, assist them in finding new ways to achieve their goals (e.g., look for the root cause of behaviour; reduce stressors; support children's efforts to initiate and join in play with others; notice, acknowledge, and document positive interactions and attempts at self-regulation and share the information with children and families to gain new insights). Helping all children in the program to gain a clearer understanding of the capabilities and challenges of others is a way to build their social competence. The ability to value the differences of others is strengthened both for typically developing children and for children who require additional support. Build connections between the home and the program by communicating with families using multiple means (e.g., send e-mail updates; create a blog; set up a documentation panel and place it near the entrance where families can find out more about their children's experiences; invite families to comment on a specific piece of documentation; suggest ways families can extend learning at home to build on a particular idea children are exploring; encourage families to help you understand the child from their perspective).

Questions for Reflection

Belonging: Cultivating Authentic Relationships and Connections

Consider your program – its philosophy, mission, policies, and daily practices. How do the program's values reflect and affect your relationship with each child? With each family? Is everyone's voice valued? How would an observer know?

Which policies and practices may be barriers to establishing relationships and ensuring the meaningful participation of all children? Of all families?

What else can be done to strengthen relationships and ensure social inclusion, participation, and a sense of belonging for each child and family?

If you make one change today to strengthen relationships in your program, what will it be? If you were to make another change tomorrow, what would it be?

> "What I've come to understand is that the most important work I do – to see a child in positive ways – is within me. I must continually work to transform my own view of children's behaviours, see their points of view, and strive to uncover how what I am seeing reveals the children's deep desire, eagerness, and capacity for relationships. There is no more important or rewarding work than this."[48]

Consider a child whose behaviour you find "difficult". What possibilities might exist if you were to view the child's behaviour and intentions from the child's point of view and from the child's desire for relationships?

48. Curtis, 2009, p. 12.

Well-Being: Nurturing Healthy Development and Well-Being

Goal for children: Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and well-being.

Program expectation: Early childhood programs nurture children's healthy development and support their growing sense of self.

Overview

There is clear evidence that early experiences have a significant impact on the biology of the body and on brain development, with implications for lifelong physical and mental health and well-being.[49]

Physical well-being. Patterns of eating, physical activity, and sleep that are established in early childhood continue into later life. Inadequate nutrition and sleep, low levels of physical activity, and persistent stress in early childhood can lead to later health problems, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, depression, and anxiety.[50] There is a variety of ways in which early years programs can have a positive influence on child health and well-being, such as by:

- providing nutritious food and beverages that incorporate family and cultural preferences;
- creating positive eating environments with foods and portion sizes that are responsive to children's cues of hunger and fullness;
- increasing children's physical activity and decreasing the amount of time spent in sedentary activities;
- respecting and finding ways to support each child's varied physiological and biological rhythms and needs for active play, rest, and quiet time.

Connections between cognition and physical and emotional well-being. Children thrive in programs where they can engage in vigorous physical play in natural outdoor spaces and playgrounds that present manageable levels of challenge. While these environments need to be safe, it is also important for them to provide children with interesting opportunities for a reasonable degree of risk taking. Program adaptations and physical accommodations can be made to allow every child to participate and be challenged in meaningful ways. In addition to providing physical benefits, active play outdoors strengthens functioning in cognitive areas such as perception, attention, creative problem solving, and complex thinking.[51] Through active play and physical exploration, children gain increasing levels of independence, learn to persevere and practise self-control, and

49. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007.

50. Chaput & Tremblay, 2012; Ontario Healthy Kids Panel, 2013.

51. Hannaford, 1995.

develop a sense of physical, emotional, and intellectual mastery and competence.[52]

Self-care. High-quality early childhood programs play an important role in supporting children's developing sense of self, autonomy, and competence. A safe environment that offers consistency and continuity as well as graduated support for children's growing independence and capacity for self-care enables children to tackle challenges, learn to persevere, and explore ways to cope with manageable levels of positive stress.[53]

Self-regulation. The ability to self-regulate is an important component of children's development. A growing number of studies have identified this ability as central to children's long-term physical, psychological, behavioural, and educational well-being.[54] Self-regulation is different from self-control (resisting an impulse) or compliance (suppressing behaviour to avoid punishment or attain a reward). Self-regulation is about how a child is able to deal effectively with stressors and then recover.[55] When children are calmly focused and alert, they are best able to modulate their emotions, pay attention, ignore distractions, inhibit impulses, assess the consequences of their actions, and understand what others are thinking and feeling. Educators can play an important role in supporting self-regulation by providing environments that reduce stressors while recognizing and supporting children's efforts and increasing ability to self-regulate. Educators can also support children's developing ability to self-regulate by being responsive and attuned to children's individual cues, arousal states, and responses to various stressors. And they can help children learn strategies for becoming or staying calm and focused by enabling them to recognize and modulate their emotional states and impulses and become more aware of the effects of their actions on others.[56]

Mental health and wellness. *Ontario's Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health* reports that 15 to 21 percent of children and youth in Ontario have at least one mental health disorder.[57] The most serious of these illnesses can continue into adulthood, affecting functioning and productivity in the community and the healthy development of the next generation. Left untreated, these can have significant impacts on the quality of children's experiences in early years settings as well as later consequences such as poor academic achievement, failure to complete high school, substance abuse, an inability to live independently, health problems, and suicide.[58]

Children's mental health and well-being must be considered within the context of their full environment of relationships. Children are at the greatest risk when the people caring for them are experiencing persistent and severe adversities. Children who experience challenging family circumstances and live in communities where there are limited resources are also more

52. Gill, 2007.
53. Diamond, 2010; Galinsky, 2010.
54. Shanker, 2013.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Ontario, 2006.
58. Ibid.

vulnerable to the impact of quality levels in child care programs. When vulnerable children spend prolonged periods of time in very poor child care environments without the presence of supportive adult relationships they have an increased likelihood of experiencing serious physical and mental health problems in the early years that can continue into adulthood.[59] High-quality early childhood programs can serve as a buffer for children experiencing temporary or long-term, persistent stress by establishing responsive, nurturing, and stable relationships with children as well as with their families.[60]

Evidence from recent studies shows that prevention and intervention is most effective when strategies are in place not only to build skills in children, but also to strengthen the capacity of all who have relationships with children. By strengthening the capacities of the adults who care for children, building skills such as coping with stressors, self-regulation, and the ability to solve problems, focus attention, and make decisions, families and educators in early years settings can reduce vulnerability for children and for themselves.[61]

Early years programs can also support families by taking a strength-based approach. When educators establish positive, authentic, and caring relationships with families and provide a safe, non-judgemental environment for shared learning, everyone benefits.

59. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012.
60. Ibid.
61. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2013.

Educators can play an important role in supporting optimal mental health and well-being for families and for children, for example, by:

- becoming aware of and connecting with community organizations that provide information and support;
- integrating practices that support resilience;
- ensuring that children and families with mental health disorders are included and accepted;
- taking a strength-based approach, recognizing and valuing the capacities that families have, while supporting them in accessing supports they need.



Goals and Expectations

Well-Being: Nurturing Healthy Development and Well-Being

Ways in which children might demonstrate health and well-being	Ways in which programs can foster health and well-being	Additional considerations for educators
Goal for children: *Every child is developing a sense of self, health, and well-being.* Children have a sense of self and health and well-being when they: • are physically active and confident in their growing abilities; • are increasingly aware of and able to make healthy choices to meet their basic needs (e.g., for food, sleep, physical activity, self-care); • experience a sense of competence, autonomy, and agency as they participate at their own pace throughout daily experiences and interactions; • are increasingly able to identify, monitor, and manage stress levels and engage in strategies for self-regulation (e.g., of emotions, attention, and behaviour); • are increasingly able to take initiative, tackle challenges with enthusiasm and persistence, and cope with and adapt to changes, frustrations, and the unexpected in everyday living;	***Program expectation:*** *Early childhood programs nurture children's healthy development and support their growing sense of self.* Educators can create contexts to support children's health and well-being by: • providing healthy meals and snacks and establishing positive eating environments that are responsive to children's cues of hunger and fullness; • incorporating opportunities and time to practise self-help and self-care skills based on each child's capabilities throughout daily routines and activities; • providing regular daily opportunities (responsive to individual capabilities) for children to be physically active and explore the world around them with their bodies, minds, and senses; • limiting activities where children are sedentary for an extended period of time; • creating safe and stimulating outdoor spaces for intentional active play that is individualized and adapted as needed to support children's varied abilities, offering challenges that are within each child's ability to master;	Many early years programs are beginning to view their outdoor playgrounds as places for discovery and learning with bodies, minds, and senses rather than just places to blow off steam. For example, some programs are removing large play structures that dominate the space in favour of more natural outdoor playgrounds. These may include a variety of natural surfaces such as grass, sand, and pebbles; pathways to follow and hills to climb; garden areas; low platforms; and an assortment of large, open-ended materials to encourage building and creative problem-solving and foster imagination and a sense of mastery. Adapting the outdoor environment to support the varied capabilities of children helps to ensure all have equitable opportunities for active outdoor play. *(continued)*

Well-Being: Nurturing Healthy Development and Well-Being *(continued)*

Ways in which children might demonstrate health and well-being	Ways in which programs can foster health and well-being	Additional considerations for educators
• are developing a strong sense of self and the ability to value their own unique identity; • are increasingly able to recognize, value, and respect the unique identity and perspectives of others.	• facilitating children's efforts to take reasonable risks, test their limits, and gain increasing competence and a sense of mastery through active play and social interactions; • recognizing and supporting children's developing and varied self-regulation abilities in all domains (biological, emotional, communicative, cognitive, social); • designing environments that are attuned to children's varied sensitivities, arousal states, and need for maintaining a calm, focused, and alert state; • reaching out to all families, including those who may be experiencing stressful and challenging circumstances, and helping them to make connections to formal supports (e.g., community agencies) and informal supports (e.g., connections with other families and/or their own support networks); • participating in professional learning and connecting with community partners to ensure the program fosters social and emotional well-being and resilience for children and families.	Daily routines such as mealtimes or getting ready to go outside can provide an ideal opportunity for children to practise their growing self-care abilities as well as promoting self-regulation, persistence, and a sense of competence. For example: having a snack table open throughout the day may help children become more aware of their internal cues for hunger; allowing ample time during mealtimes and daily routines creates a positive environment for children to practise self-help skills such as serving themselves and/or getting dressed; knowing when to stand back and let children test their abilities helps children recognize and value their own efforts and progress. Educators can support developing self-regulation skills by, for example, responding in a calming manner to an infant's distress and supporting self-soothing behaviours; helping toddlers use language to express their wants and needs; and helping older children to recognize stressors and develop the ability to manage their own arousal states.

Questions for Reflection

Well-Being: Nurturing Healthy Development and Well-Being

How can your program put more emphasis on outdoor exploration and play that engage the body, mind, and senses?

How can the environment be arranged to encourage children to engage in activities that involve an element of manageable risk (appropriate for children's varied capabilities)?

What improvements are needed to ensure that the type of meals/snacks and the eating environment reflect the goals for children?

Children's present and future well-being is influenced by their ability to self-regulate. How can your program move from a focus on the adult managing children's behaviour towards a stronger focus on supporting children's developing self-regulation capacities?

What environmental factors may be causing stress for children? What changes can be made to reduce stress for *all* who use the space?

How can you connect with community partners to better support the mental health and well-being of families and children?

Engagement: Creating Contexts for Learning through Exploration, Play, and Inquiry

Goal for children: Every child is an active and engaged learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses.

Program expectation: Early childhood programs provide environments and experiences to engage children in active, creative, and meaningful exploration, play, and inquiry.

Overview

"Engagement" refers to a state of being genuinely involved and interested in what one is doing. Optimal conditions for learning occur when we are fully engaged. For children, this happens in play that evolves from the child's natural curiosity – active play that allows children to explore with their bodies, minds, and senses, stimulating them to ask questions, test theories, solve problems, engage in creative thinking, and make meaning of the world around them. These investigations through play fuse intellect and feeling to help children make connections and develop the capacity for higher-order thinking.[62] Research into learning and development – from the early theories of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky to the latest findings of neuroscience – makes it clear that children learn best when they are fully engaged in active exploration, play, and inquiry.

62. Gopnik, 2009.

When children initiate experiences, generate ideas, plan, problem-solve, make meaningful choices, and act spontaneously through play, they are more likely to be happy and get along well with others,[63] to have lower levels of stress, and to be attentive and motivated to learn.[64] When children are fully engaged, they develop dispositions and skills for lifelong learning that are important for success in school and beyond.

The role of the educator. Children are most likely to engage in long, complex episodes of play and demonstrate interest in learning when educators value their ideas and contributions to the curriculum.[65] Children's engagement and learning are enhanced when educators are co-learners. This approach means that rather than acting as "keepers of knowledge" or the sole planners of programs, educators engage with children, planning, participating, and learning with the child and about his or her questions, theories, and curiosities. Educators can gain a deeper understanding of children's developing skills and evolving learning approaches and can support new learning by collaborating with children in discovery and sustained, shared thinking. When educators take a purposefully curious approach to new experiences and ideas rather than acting as the expert, children are more likely to engage in creative problem solving and more complex play and inquiry.[66]

63. Ishimine et al., 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004.
64. Shanker, 2013.
65. Hannikainen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010.
66. Gopnik, 2011.

Regardless of children's abilities, educator attitudes are critical in fostering children's engagement. When educators believe that all children have the right to participate and when they use inclusive approaches, they are more likely to find ways to reduce barriers, understand how each child learns, and create environments and experiences that are meaningful and engaging.[67] Those in leadership roles in early years programs play a critical role in supporting staff, accessing supports, and creating a culture that ensures inclusive practices.[68]

The environment as educator. The environment plays a key role in the quality of children's exploration and play. Indoor and outdoor spaces, materials, and furnishings (including how they are positioned), accommodations to ensure equitable learning opportunities and participation for children with special needs, as well as the general design of the space, and the organization of time, all have a significant influence on children's level of engagement and the possibilities for in-depth exploration and learning.

"*A lack of clutter [as well as] thoughtfully organized, rich open-ended materials invite the children to make relationships, and to communicate their ideas in many ways ... It is not merely a matter of decorating. The arrangements of materials should invite engagement, meaning-making, and exploration. Thinking of 'aesthetic' as being the opposite of 'anaesthetic', a shutting down of the senses, may help with appraising the environment in a richer way.*"[69]

67. UNESCO, 2009.
68. Irwin et al., 2004.
69. Callaghan, 2013, p. 12.

Children benefit significantly from having long periods of time to explore in environments equipped with interesting, open-ended materials that can be used in many ways, inviting investigation and complex play. Activities in outdoor spaces that are designed to inspire investigation with bodies, senses, and minds improve children's physical health and emotional well-being and enhance their capabilities for self-regulation, creative problem solving, and communication. Children's self-discipline, self-awareness, and ability to focus also improve, as does their development of social skills such as cooperation and flexibility.[70]



70. Louv, 2008.

Goals and Expectations

Engagement: Creating Contexts for Learning through Exploration, Play, and Inquiry

Ways in which children might demonstrate engagement	Ways in which programs can foster engagement	Additional considerations for educators
Goal for children: *Every child is an active and engaged learner who explores the world with body, mind, and senses.* Children are engaged learners when they: • express joy and wonder in their encounters with the environment, the natural world, and other people; • focus attention, manipulate, investigate, observe, question, test theories, solve problems, create, and represent ideas and their understanding of the world around them through play in divergent and increasingly complex ways; • engage with others to negotiate, collaborate, create, and communicate feelings, ideas, experiences, and knowledge; • through their play, explore materials that support an increasing awareness and understanding of concepts associated with literacy and numeracy;	***Program expectation:*** *Early childhood programs provide environments and experiences to engage children in active, creative, and meaningful exploration, play, and inquiry.* Educators can create contexts that engage children by: • designing indoor and outdoor environments and experiences that spark curiosity, invite investigation, and provide challenges that are responsive to individual capabilities to help children extend the boundaries of their learning; • connecting with families and communities and inviting their participation to ensure that environments and experiences reflect and are relevant to children's everyday lives; • providing a wide variety of interesting objects and open-ended materials for children to explore with their senses, manipulate, and investigate; • planning daily routines (the flow of the day) with limited interruptions and transitions to maintain a sense of calm and simplicity for infants and toddlers, and providing ample opportunities through large blocks of time for older children to engage in sustained, complex play and inquiry;	Assess the type of toys and materials available in your program and consider replacing those that limit exploration (e.g., single-purpose toys) with "open-ended" materials that can be used in many ways (e.g., *for infants*: objects that encourage exploration of questions such as, "How does this feel, sound, taste, move?"; *for toddlers*: materials to help them explore questions such as, "What parts does this have? What can I make it do?"; *for preschoolers*: materials that encourage construction and exploratory questions such as, "How does this go together?" "What can I make?"; *for older children*: opportunities to encourage representation of their thinking and ideas through various mediums). *(continued)*

Engagement: Creating Contexts for Learning through Exploration, Play, and Inquiry *(continued)*

Ways in which children might demonstrate engagement	Ways in which programs can foster engagement	Additional considerations for educators
• participate to the best of their abilities in an inclusive learning environment.	• participating with children as a co-investigator, co-learner, and co-planner rather than as director or "keeper of knowledge" and "keeper of the plans" in a way that is separate and apart from the children; • continuously questioning and testing their own theories and strategies and seeking new ideas to facilitate children's exploration and understanding of the world around them in meaningful ways; • working with families and community partners to ensure that environments and experiences provide equal learning experiences for all children by making flexible program adaptations and providing special equipment and/or adaptive devices (as recommended by a regulated health professional); • ensuring that the spaces and experiences provided promote play and inquiry that will help children discover and develop an increasing awareness and understanding of key concepts, including those associated with literacy and numeracy development; • documenting and making children's thinking, learning, and competence visible to children, families, and others.	Create environments and experiences that support active engagement and meaningful exploration by focusing on the questions and theories children investigate through their play. This may involve moving away from traditional, adult-chosen themes towards what children are engaged and interested in as a starting point for planning. Educators also need to make decisions about the types of interests that have potential for rich and complex play. This could mean focusing less on the objects that interest children and more on what children are doing with the objects: What questions are they asking through their play? What theories are they testing? What are they noticing and attending to? What problems are they solving? For example, observing a group of children interested in cars, educators noticed that it wasn't so much the cars children were focused on as more complex questions such as, "How can I make it move?"; "What happens on different surfaces?"; "How can I make it go faster?"; "How can I build a ramp?"; "What other things roll?"; "What might happen if I try these ideas outside?" Exploring questions and theories about "movement" through their play deepens children's learning and engages them in thinking about physics and mathematical concepts.

Questions for Reflection

Engagement: Creating Contexts for Learning through Exploration, Play, and Inquiry

If we see all children as curious, competent, and capable of complex thinking, how will this be reflected in the environment? How could greater complexity and challenge be integrated into the environment?

How do you know when children and families are fully engaged? Based on your observations of individual children, when are they most engaged? How can you give visibility to this?

Consider how the environment and experiences that you provide for children engage them. What draws them in?

What areas of the environment do not attract children? Why might this be? What changes might be needed?

How can families be engaged and drawn in to the space? How can children and families be engaged in shaping the environment?

What barriers exist that may limit some children's ability to engage in active exploration, play, and inquiry? What adaptations and changes might be made to ensure the inclusion and participation of every child?

How does the flow of the day (e.g., daily schedule, routines, transitions) allow children to make choices (e.g., to engage in in-depth exploration over several days; to relax and do nothing; to reflect on their experiences)?

(continued)

Engagement: Creating Contexts for Learning through Exploration, Play, and Inquiry *(continued)*

What questions and theories do the children seem to be exploring through their play? What are they wondering about in the ways they use materials (e.g., what does their non-verbal communication tell you)? How can you make these visible? What are families noticing at home?

What next steps might you take, based on these observations, to support more complex play and inquiry? For example, how can the children's questions and theories be tested, revised, and communicated?

What questions do you have? What sparks your curiosity?

Since educators are researchers within their programs or communities, what would you like to investigate further in your program?

How would you further complete this investigation with your colleagues or with the children in the program?

Expression: Fostering Communication and Expression in All Forms

Goal for children: Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways.

Program expectation: Early childhood programs foster communication and expression in all forms.

Overview

Seeing children as capable and powerful communicators from birth onwards means recognizing them as active social partners who are able to initiate and respond to communication exchanges. Conversation can occur with even the youngest infants when adults are attuned to the child's subtle verbal and non-verbal cues and gestures and when they respond by interacting in "serve and return" exchanges. Responsiveness to the infant's communication "wires" the child's brain for learning.[71]

When educators are aware of and able to understand and respond to the many "languages" children use to communicate, they give every child a "voice". Regardless of the child's age or ability, reciprocal communication exchanges (especially those that allow children to initiate conversation with others) build a sense of connection and enhance children's language skills, social conversational skills, and cognitive activity. In authentic conversations, adults show respect for what the child is interested in and what the child is trying to communicate and are also willing to share their own perspective in a positive and meaningful way to continue the exchange. These same practices are true for communication with families, caregivers, and co-workers. Traditionally, educators have found that much of their communication with children involves directing them – giving instructions, telling children what to do, and correcting their behaviour – rather than really connecting with them in a meaningful way.[72] However, an approach that emphasizes listening, responding to, and building on child-initiated communication and conversation can be a more effective way to promote children's language acquisition[73] and their development of social skills, empathetic understanding, and ability to pay attention.[74] Asking for and considering children's ideas in joint dialogue can help to strengthen their sense of autonomy, their competence, and their critical thinking skills.[75] For children who may be experiencing language delays or challenges, it is key for educators to work with community agencies to provide support during the early years to ensure successful participation in all aspects of the program.

71. Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007.

72. Clinton, 2013, pp. 5–10.

73. Rudd et al., 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004.

74. Dalli et al., 2011.

75. Ibid.

Opportunities for children to explore language and literacy through play contribute to their development of strong language and cognitive abilities in both the short and the long term.[76] Programs can best support emerging literacy skills by providing open-ended materials that foster imagination and symbolic play, including signs, symbols, and props that support print awareness in authentic contexts; by encouraging children to engage in play with words and sounds in song and rhyme; and by offering numerous opportunities for children to share books and stories.

Communication also happens through creative expression. When children manipulate materials, explore music and movement, create symbols (e.g., mark-making), and engage in imaginative expression (e.g., visual art) and dramatic play, they are communicating. Creating and designing fuse together the cognitive, emotional, and physical domains – thinking, feeling, and doing. Encouraging the creative expression of ideas, feelings, and interpretations using a variety of materials also helps solidify children's learning, enhances their creative problem-solving and critical thinking skills,[77] and strengthens their memory and sense of identity.[78]

Valuing and protecting children's first language and/or traditional language and culture, and fostering second-language acquisition. Valuing children's first language is an important way of affirming their cultural identity, sense of self, and place in the broader community. It also facilitates second-language acquisition. Programs where children's home language and culture are valued and supported through various means (e.g., books, signs, inviting family or community members to share their language and cultural traditions) can strengthen children's overall language skills[79] and build a sense of self.

Affirmation of children's linguistic and cultural heritage is particularly important for Franco-Ontarian families and Ontario's First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. For Aboriginal children, knowledge of their indigenous languages and cultural teachings strengthens their sense of identity and contributes to the well-being of current and future generations.[80] Early childhood settings in francophone communities contribute to the protection, enhancement, and transmission of the French language and culture in Ontario by helping children and families participate in day-to-day activities in French.



76. Burchinal et al., 2008; Cunningham, 2010; Wayne et al., 2007.
77. Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2010.
78. Callaghan & Wien, 2012.
79. Aukrust, 2007.
80. Chiefs of Ontario, 2012.

Goals and Expectations

Expression: Fostering Communication and Expression in All Forms

Ways in which children might communicate and demonstrate that they can express themselves	**Ways in which programs can foster communication and expression**	**Additional considerations for educators**
Goal for children: *Every child is a capable communicator who expresses himself or herself in many ways.* Children are able to communicate when they: • initiate, respond to, and engage in reciprocal communication with others; • learn, understand, and use language for a variety of purposes; • use varied forms of creative expression to communicate feelings, experiences, ideas, and understanding of the world around them; • express themselves in their first language in addition to gaining competence in language acquisition; • participate in meaningful interaction and communication with peers and adults, regardless of their abilities;	***Program expectation:*** *Early childhood programs foster communication and expression in all forms.* Educators can create contexts that foster communication by: • being attuned and responding to children's varied cues and communications; • engaging in authentic, reciprocal communication with children, where children participate as both initiators and equal partners; • facilitating successful communication between children by helping children listen to and express themselves to one another; • documenting children's communication to help them revisit thoughts and ideas expressed in order to extend their understanding; • providing time, space, and materials to encourage expression through creative materials that reflect children's capabilities as well as their social and cultural background;	Conversations can happen with children of all ages and abilities (e.g., *with infants or non-verbal children*: by repeating sounds and gestures initiated by the child, following the child's gaze, and verbalizing what you believe the child is communicating; by building on child-initiated conversation as a partner rather than the "director" of the conversation). Encourage conversation among children (e.g., rather than speaking for the child, act as a coach to help the child find the right words and approach; model listening strategies and support the child's listening skills). *(continued)*

Expression: Fostering Communication and Expression in All Forms *(continued)*

Ways in which children might communicate and demonstrate that they can express themselves	**Ways in which programs can foster communication and expression**	**Additional considerations for educators**
• develop increasing capacity in the foundations of language that will support later reading and writing.	• engaging and cultivating children's connections with stories and books in a variety of contexts (e.g., by sharing books and telling stories with individuals, small groups, and large groups), and for a variety of purposes (e.g., to foster close relationships, explore and play with language structures, recount past events, research ideas, spark conversations, and connect with cultural traditions); • weaving language- and literacy-related activities and materials into all daily experiences, routines, and physical spaces; • working with families and community members to find ways to support and enrich the transmission of language and culture; • becoming aware of the many "languages" children use to communicate and providing individualized support so children of all abilities can express themselves and be heard; • reflecting continuously on and seeking to improve their own communication strategies and techniques for facilitating responsive, authentic conversations with children and families.	Support children's expression in all forms. For example, some programs are rethinking art activities – moving away from using pre-cut materials or expecting children to complete specific adult-determined products and instead considering children's art as a form of expression. When educators provide good-quality materials and ample time throughout the day, children are encouraged to express themselves through drawing, painting, sculpture, movement, music, and storytelling to communicate their exploration of the materials or to represent their ideas, experiences, and understanding of the world. Support children's language and literacy development throughout the environment (e.g., recall and retell past events; revisit documentation with children; place familiar print materials and books in different areas to spark ideas for play and exploration – for example, cookbooks in the kitchen area, architectural photos as a resource for construction projects; encourage children and families to create their own books and stories to share with each other).

Questions for Reflection

Expression: Fostering Communication and Expression in All Forms

At the end of each day, ask yourself, "How much time did I spend connecting (direct and meaningful interactions)? Directing (telling children what to do)? Correcting (telling children what not to do)?" What is your C:D:C ratio?

Working with colleagues (and outside agencies that may support speech and/or language development), identify strategies to support each other in engaging children in authentic, reciprocal communication exchanges and conversations (e.g., "What can we do so that we're hearing more of the children's voices and less of the adult voices?").

Considering that children have "100 languages", how many ways are there for children to express themselves in your program?

How can you make sure that every child, regardless of his or her communication abilities, is heard?

How can families have a stronger "voice" in the program?

What policies and procedures can administrators put in place to ensure every educator feels that his or her voice is heard and valued?

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